

LITTLE HUMBOLDT RIVER WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 42,213 Acres

The Little Humboldt River WSA (NV-010-132), located 65 miles northwest of Elko and about 3 miles north of Midas, Nevada on the eastern flank of the Snowstorm Mountains, comprises 42,213 acres of BLM land with 480 acres of private inholdings. Roads and fences delineate about half the WSA's boundaries. The remainder follows legal subdivisions. A fence forms the north half of the eastern boundary. The south half of the eastern boundary runs "point-to-point" from the fence to the western boundary of the SE¼ of section 29, T40N, R46E, and follows this legal subdivision to a jeep trail. The boundary follows the jeep trail south to the southern boundary road in Oregon Canyon. Beginning in section 6, T39N, R46E and ending in the SW¼ of section 2, T40N, R44E, the boundary heads in a northwesterly direction, following dirt roads and legal subdivisions between public and private lands. The remainder of the boundary follows dirt roads north and east to the WSA's northeast corner.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE -

29,775 acres recommended for wilderness

12,438 acres recommended for nonwilderness

The 29,775-acre area is recommended for wilderness because it contains diverse ecosystems with high wilderness values. The recommended area contains deep canyons and drainages, volcanic mesas, high rocky ridges, and wide undulating plains. Aspens, willows, and wild roses line the watercourses. Diverse wildlife species, including California bighorn sheep, mule deer, Lahontan cutthroat trout, pronghorn antelope, sage grouse, quail, and raptors, contribute to the naturalness and outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation. Recreation opportunities include photography, hunting, fishing, camping, hiking, horseback riding, rock climbing, and viewing wild horses.

The area recommended for wilderness contains two inholdings. A 40-acre parcel at the southern end has no developed access and is too rugged for development. A cherrystem road provides access to the 160-acre parcel at Castle Place in the northern portion. This parcel contains a corral, but its primary use is recreational. Neither the corral nor cherrystem road is substantially noticeable. The area recommended for wilderness contains one other cherrystem road, which is not visible from most of the recommended area or the canyon areas. These roads are lightly used and their impact on wilderness values is insignificant. The wilderness recommendation would apply to either inholding, if acquired through purchase or exchange.

Within the area recommended for wilderness, the USGS identified two areas with potential for zeolites and one area with potential for gold. Wilderness values in all three areas are considered higher than the mineral potential. Development of the two zeolite deposits is unlikely because of low quality and extreme distance from markets. Wilderness values, especially those along the South Fork Little Humboldt River, are considered far more important than the potential for zeolite.

The USGS identified an area of moderate gold potential along the South Fork Little Humboldt River. Testing showed anomalous amounts of arsenic and mercury, suggesting the presence of gold. These findings are not significant enough to outweigh the outstanding opportunities for both solitude and primitive recreation along the river and the need to maintain the river's integrity.

The recommended for wilderness boundary is easily identifiable and could be marked on the ground, but few topographic barriers exist to prevent cross-country vehicle travel. The area's overall ruggedness and internal canyons would discourage most cross-country travel.

The southeastern portion is not recommended for wilderness because of high mineral potential and less than outstanding opportunities for solitude. The area has a high potential for gold and is a probable extension of the mining district to the south.

Areas along the western boundary are not recommended for wilderness due to mineral potential, irregular boundaries formed by private lands, inholdings and cherrystem roads. The southwestern portion's mineral potential is high for gold. The areas

are natural, but lack the vegetative and topographic screening necessary for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation. The sights and sounds of mineral development on inholdings and adjacent private lands would adversely affect naturalness and solitude.

The northwestern corner is not recommended for wilderness. The area is natural but lacks topographic or vegetative screening. The terrain is conducive to cross-country vehicle travel that could adversely affect the area's naturalness.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The WSA generally appears natural. The WSA lies in the upper basin of the South Fork Little Humboldt River between the Snowstorm Mountains, Castle Ridge, and the Owyhee Bluffs. Rolling hills and benches of sagebrush-grassland dissected by steep-walled, narrow canyons characterize the WSA. Elevations range from 5,079 to 7,722 feet. Canyons are over 400 feet deep in places and contain dense stands of willow, aspen, and wild rose. Many wildlife species, including big game animals, upland game birds, raptors, and Lahontan cutthroat trout, occur in the WSA.

Although man-made facilities exist, they are possible to escape in much of the WSA. Four ways, totalling 14 miles, extend into the WSA. Thirteen and one half miles of barbed wire fence are found throughout the WSA. Half this fencing was constructed in 1984 for riparian enhancement along the South Fork Little Humboldt River. The remaining fences were constructed in 1983 as pasture fences and extend westward from near the confluence of First Creek with the South Fork Little Humboldt River.

B. Solitude: The topography, vegetation, and size provide outstanding opportunities for solitude in most of the Little Humboldt River WSA. Vegetative screening is excellent along the river and side canyons, but is only moderate to poor on the rolling hills and flats. Topographic screening is outstanding in the canyons and drainages, and when combined with the vegetative screening, provides superior opportunities for solitude. Areas close to cherrystem roads, inholdings, and private land parcels, where mineral and other activities are anticipated, would have reduced opportunities for solitude. The remainder of the WSA has moderate opportunities for solitude due to moderate to good topographic screening. The recommendation would eliminate those areas with poor opportunities for solitude.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: The deeply-dissected, narrow canyons and the stream confluences with their spire-like formations offer outstanding opportunities for photography, rock climbing, hiking, fishing, hunting, and exploring. The tributaries offer attractions away from the main canyon. A significant opportunity exists for viewing and photographing wild horses. The lack of vegetative screening, wide flat mesas and rolling hills, which normally detract from wilderness values, enhance wild horse viewing. Opportunities for hiking vary from fair on the flats to very difficult within the canyon. Trips could average two to five days. Good to excellent camping opportunities exist in the canyons and along the streams. Camping opportunities are limited within the WSA's northern third because of the lack of shelter and water away from the river. Before pasture fence construction, wild horse trails provided excellent horseback riding opportunities. If these temporary fences are removed, the area could again accommodate three-day trips. The river provides good trout fishing opportunities. The unique riparian habitat supports an outstanding diversity of large and small game and upland birds. The rugged rock formations and good condition riparian areas support high populations of cliff-nesting prairie falcons and golden eagles, providing outstanding opportunities for viewing and study.

D. Special Features: The WSA provides a unique area for studying the transition zone between the southern Owyhee Cold Desert and a Basin and Range aspen forest without the typical pinyon-juniper woodlands. Within the WSA's northern portion, *Artemisia packardiae*, a rare sagebrush, is thought to occur.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The entire WSA is manageable as wilderness. There are no pre-FLPMA mining claims or other rights. Three inholdings near the WSA boundary could require constructed access, which would slightly reduce wilderness values in their immediate vicinity. Access would not require more than a few hundred feet of road and would not result in other WSA lands becoming unmanageable.

The portion recommended for wilderness would have less management concerns over the long term. The recommended boundary would remove three cherrystem roads, two pit reservoirs, three inholdings, four intrusionary tracts of private land, and miles of irregular WSA boundary that are difficult to locate on the ground. While the recommended for wilderness boundary would include two inholdings, two cherrystem roads, and riparian and livestock management fences, this area could be managed over the long term to protect wilderness values and outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive and for unconfined recreation.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

Different parts of the study area have varying potential for disseminated gold and zeolites. The study area does include any known economic mineral resources. The older volcanic rocks near Brush Creek and near Snowstorm Creek have high potential for disseminated gold. An area along the South Fork Little Humboldt River has moderate potential for disseminated gold. The remainder of the study area has low potential for disseminated gold. As of October 1989, there were approximately 400 post-FLPMA mining claims, most in the WSA's northwest and southeast portions.

The WSA's northeastern portion has high or moderate potential for zeolites. The remainder of the study area has low potential for zeolites. The WSA has low potential for other minerals, energy resources, and sand and gravel.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC COMMENTS

The BLM received 31 comments on the draft EIS; 16 mentioned wilderness. Ten of these comments were specific to the Little Humboldt River WSA. Three supported the BLM's recommendation, two opposed wilderness designation, three supported designating the entire WSA as wilderness, and two supported designating more than the entire WSA as wilderness. A national minerals coalition expressed concerns about the area's mineral potential.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Park Service, USGS, Fish and Wildlife Service, and EPA commented on the draft EIS. Only the EPA had WSA-specific comments. The Governor of Nevada's consistency review supported wilderness designation for a smaller area closer to the canyon rim because of manageability concerns and mineral potential. Local government entities generally opposed all wilderness designation.

The BLM received one comment on the Elko Final Wilderness EIS; the EPA endorsed the BLM's recommendation.